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JACK ANDERSON

Israel Ponders Resuming Ties With the Soviets

Menachem Begin has displayed certain peculiarities that tend to raise the hair on the back of President Reagan's neck.

Sources close to the president say he harbors a deep uncertainty about Begin's judgment and a fear of his adventurism.

The replacement of Begin as prime minister of Israel, Reagan feels, would remove an incendiary from the midst of the powderkegs. A more moderate Israeli government might enable the bitter adversaries in the Middle East to muddle through without Armageddon.

But the president would like to effectuate a change in Israel's leadership without jarring Begin's sensibilities.

The National Security Council has been secretly discussing the prospects of Begin's removal. But Reagan carefully reassured the embattled Israeli leader last week that Washington has no intention of meddling in Israel's internal politics. For Reagan is worried how Begin might react.

For one thing, the Soviets are

casting flirtatious glances in Begin's direction. A possible Soviet-Israeli rapprochement has been discussed at the highest levels in Moscow and Jerusalem. Evidence of this is cited in CIA and State Department documents shown to my associate Dale Van Atta.

These documents are classified so far above top-secret that even the code names used to classify them are top-secret. This usually indicates a need to protect U.S. spies who have penetrated to the innermost circles of foreign governments.

The documents indicate that Israel has been playing coy since about 1970, when the Soviets first began making overtures.

The subject of renewed diplomatic relations has been brought up intermittently at secret meetings ever since.

While Israel has remained "deeply suspicious of Soviet policy toward the Middle East," an ultra-secret document reports, "Israeli leaders have made it clear they would be receptive to a Soviet overture to resume official ties Indeed, Tel Aviv probes regularly for signs that Moscow may be considering significant shifts in policy toward Israel."

Another CIA report, which also has an exotic classification stamp, states that the "number of Soviet officials in Moscow [who] favor relations with Israel [has been] growing." The argument of these Soviet

officials is that "the absence of Soviet-Israeli diplomatic ties favors Washington's Middle East policy," the CIA explains.

There's also a domestic reason: "Moscow believes an Israeli embassy in Moscow would weaken protests by Soviet Jewish dissidents, since the Kremlin views such protests largely as the result of unhappiness with Soviet policy toward Israel."

A key Soviet diplomat once told U.S. officials in confidence that he had been assigned to Israel, a CIA report notes, adding: "From time to time, other Soviet officials have said that the USSR has earmarked personnel for service in Tel Aviv."

The Kremlin is populated with cold pragmatists who are feeling some discomfiture over the pitiful performance of their Syrian client against the Israelis in Lebanon. The Syrians blame the poor showing on their Soviet-made weapons; the Russians contend that the Syrian soldiers and pilots were at fault. This controversy has stirred anew Soviet interest in renewing its contacts with Israel.

For their part, some Israeli leaders welcome the idea of restoring ties with Moscow. They see it as a chance to show their independence of the United States and eventually to play off one superpower against the other to Israel's advantage. Chief among these Israeli leaders is Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir.